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impaginazione
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Symbols and images
in Italian political philosophy

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1. SYMBOLIC POLITICS

The first cues of "symbolic politics" as a specific area of study, go back to seminars, organized within the framework of the political philosophy course at the University of Messina (at the time held by G.M. Chiodi), after a conference dedicated to the topic of ideology in 1980. Among the first to have contributed with research on symbolic studies are G. M. Chiodi, L. Alfieri, C. Bonvecchio, D. Mazzù. Those seminars set in motion the foundation of many research centers: "Center Myth, Symbols and Politics" at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Messina, which also developed the project of a series of publications with the same title, published by Giappichelli in Turin. In the 1990's a University Center, called "European Study Center on Myth and Symbol" was founded and is currently still active. Over time many study meetings and international conferences have been organized and

published by "Heliopolis", which is the official body of various centers of symbolic studies, pertaining to the net called "Symbolicum". The activity of the European Center, in fact, has promoted the birth of similar institutions that have the same topic and maintain with it close cooperation. Since the early 2000's we have had the following: "Center of symbolic politics and the cultural forms" at the University of Insubria; C.R.E.S.O in Naples' Federico Secondo, now in Capua; the "Research Center on Iconology, Symbolic Politics and of the Sacred" at the University of Teramo; "Center for research on Imaginary and Symbols of History and Politics" at the University of Trieste; "Center for the symbolic study of law" at the University of Pavia; "Center for the Study of Classics and German Symbols and Politics" at the University of Arezzo. Symbolic politics is a specific area of study in the ministerial declaratory of the broad philosophical-political spectrum. The publications of its scholars appear in a variety of scientific collections and reviews. Evidently the interest in symbols, under the political profile, has been developed on the basis of the acknowledgment of the importance of the symbol for the collective action.

2. GROUPS, INTERESTS AND SYMBOLS

In the Eighties any reference to symbolic politics was completely non-existent in political philosophy and in political science. The main references were generally oriented towards dialectical and historical theories, at times with an economic approach or oriented to systemic models or conflict models, or based on various developments of individualistic models, like Olson for example. The model of reference to explain the political phenomena then was almost elaborated by Mancur Olson (Olson 1971), who analyzes group dynamics (and therefore also political dynamics) on the basis of interests which every member of the group has in order to participate in the group. The logic of the political truth goes back to the logic of individual interests, according to Leon Festinger and Arold Laski. (Olson 1971). The interpretation of the function of symbols is that of Edelmann, according to whom symbols are: "the only means through which those groups that do not have the ability to analize complex situations rationally can be adapted to it; therefore they need stereotypes, hyper – simplification and psychological reassurances." Symbols (for the masses) are all the more necessary because the elites organize themselves in order for their own interests to prevail. (Edelmann, 1987, p. 107). Symbols were only external and communicative. Meanwhile, even the dominion more closely relevant to political studies awoke to the importance of symbols. Alessandro Pizzorno develops the "symbolic goods" idea while, contextually,

the well tangible notion of material goods in connection with which individual interest is formed is being eroded. He also changes the idea of individual, who is no longer the biological individual but an individual inscribed in a social logic of identity, of roles and of belongings. (Pizzorno 1993, p. 142.) Nevertheless, the expression "symbolic goods" does not call into question Olson's theoretical system and still today, more or less, the reference to symbols is only used in order to comprise the recent phenomena of populism and the political leadership dominated by the media revolution.

3. HOMO SYMBOLICUS

Italian symbolic politics, which has the merit of having started an epistemological reflection on symbols (Chiodi 2010) already back in the Eighties, proceed in a totally different direction. Let us look at the main theoretical lines. First of all, it is worth specifying that we are not referring to symbol as mentioned by Cassirer, namely a form that also includes rational thought in order to control symbols and meanings, nor as a form similar to the semeiotic one, which focuses on languages and analyzes them under the aspect of their structure and their modalities of significance, going from purely conventional or merely informative, to expressive and evocative forms. Not even the symbol is to be intended, accordling to Freud, as an unconscious surrogate of the concept of conscience and the symbolic function is not preparatory to the conceptual expression. According to the Italian symbol school, symbols are rooted in human nature – Girolamo Cardano defines this as homo symbolicus – the symbolic – archetypic grid on which the psychic life rests, ie it is neither dismissable nor superable. According to Durand, symbols do not need to be interpreted with the help of elements extrinsic to the imagining conscience…" (Durand 1996, p. 29)

4. IMAGINAL

We can understand symbols starting from the notion of "imaginal". The imaginal dimension is neither rational nor unconscious. At the same time it is different from pure imagination, understood as a moment of participation in the world of fantasy or abstraction. Imaginal is a concept which is based on Creuzer's studies on myth (Creuzer 1918), and on Henry Corbin, a famous expert of the ancient Islamic civilization, who deals with mundus imaginalis, considering it an intermediate zone between the world of sensitive percep-

tions and that of pure spirituality (Corbin 2005). It is an inner and externalized dimension and, at the same time, also has an external and interiorized dimension, which presents itself as a mundus made of images and creative ideas, leading to the coincidence of imagination with reality. The Imaginal is a specific reality composed of sensitive, perceivable elements, perfectly pertaining to the sphere of conscious elements and meanwhile of imperceptible, indeterminable elements that can be traced back to zones of the being that psycology would define as part of the unconscious. More specifically, imaginal is referred to phenomena that are an intermingling of imagination and reality, an inseparable synthesis of idio-affective and intellettive displays, emotional and rational at the same time, able to express a totality of the experience. The Imaginal, therefore, gives reality to the imaginary and covers reality with imagination; in other words, it makes what we feel in our imagination feel alive and real and, at the same time, what we know is the reality of being in the imagination. There is no disjunction between real and imaginary. It is an important element of identity.

5. The liminal conscience

The "imaginal" is the expression of a specific state of conscience which Giulio M.Chiodi defined as "liminal" It is a state "of conscience" because it is perceived consciously by those who take part in it; itis also " liminal" because it involves uncontrolled components of the Deep, without plunging completely in the unconscious. It is situated between the visible and the invisible, the defined and the indefinite, the speakable and the inexpressibile, conscious and inconscious, mixing both contextually and inseparably, making them compatible in the same entity. In "imaginal", reality and imaginary meet each other. Imaginal assures a cohesive, compact, inseparable junction between imaginary and real. Imaginal establishes, therefore, a double junction or identification. Disintegrating the symbol, splitting it into signifier and signified lead to its destruction dissolving the characteristic identitary unit.

a. Imaginal combines imagination with reality, thereby constructs what determines our stronger and decisive identities and therefore also expresses the full sense of the things in which we recognize ourselves, the meanings and the vital directives entirely participated.

b. The Imaginal, in fact, signifies a sense of totality, combining the dimensions of the unconscious which, from the deep of our being, does not emerge to the conscience, lying unknown in the crypts of our being – with the knowl-

edge of the mind and the will and also involving the world of instincts and emotions. The symbol finds its substance here completely. The symbol is not simply imaginary because it is also real; and it is not simply real because also produced by imaginary existentially participated.

c. The imaginal is not arbitrary: images are philogenetically derived from sedimented cultural tradition. Every strong image expresses its own energy because it connects, provoking a resonance that vibrates deep into unconscious levels.

d. The imaginal, if studied according to the symbolic method, cannot be analysed from the outside, like any other object of scientific investigation; the imaginal can be observed in a way in which the representation of the object is assimilated and modelled by the pulsional and emotional imperatives of the subject. The reversibility of the terms is the particular nature of the product as well as of the way.

6. The iconic act

The political importance of the symbol and of the imaginal is of absolute evidence. The political employment of the images has always existed; the glut of images produced from day to day with smartphones, television channels, and the Internet, shrouding the entire planet, have given impetus to intense research on the role and the power of images. In that respect, it is worth differentiating the nature of symbolic images from social allegory, where the symbols are reduced to simple signs in the communication geared toward expression and insignificance. With different outcomes here as well. The political scientist Giovanni Sartori writes, at the end of the Nineties, a book entitled Homo Videns, in which the visual culture – interpreted as a phenomenon of dependency from television and Internet – is regarded negatively, as a factor of disinformation and impoverishment which leads to an "emptied" demo, easy prey of "a master race of small elite with tecno-brains highly gifted" (Sartori 2000, p. 97). This homo videns is opposed the homo rational "animal" now under attack. The consideration of the imaginal and symbolic dimension does not lead to the reduction of the man to either videns nr to rational, because it understands it in its psyche as a whole, where reason is also emotional and perception is not reduced to merely a sensory reception separated if not opposed to rationality. Much more productive, in order to clarify the dimension of the imaginal, is the path the scholars of the images take. Horst Bredekamp following Aby Warburg and Edgard Wind (Wind 1997), has inquired about

the structure of the image, supplying important elements to understand how imaginal works. Evidently the image is not considered an inferior and secondary moment regarding the language, not to mention the reason. The creation of images, the "aesthetic differentiation" is an original feature of homo sapiens (Bredekamp 2015 p. 17). The image is not merely a passive representation that is given to the look. On the contrary, it is to be interpreted in the light of the notion of "iconic act", that is an action the image performs towards an actor – who looks – in which it causes effects. With the introduction of the concept of "iconic act", the topic becomes the "latency of the image that, in a game of give and take with the observer, succeeds in carrying out an independent and active role" (Bredekamp 2015). The issues raised on the iconic act are, therefore, pointed to "characterize the force that allows the image to jump, by means of a visual or tactile fruition, from a state of latency to the exterior effectiveness of the perception, the thought and the behaviour." (Bredekamp 2015 p. 36.). What is taken into analysis, in the theory of iconic act, is not simply the subject who looks opposed to the image, but the relation between the two. The relation reveals an activity of the image on the observer. The effectiveness of the iconic act on the perceptive plan, of the thought and the behaviour, is something that stems from the same image as well as from the observer's reaction, ie an observer who looks, touches and listens. There is an immanent energy at work, freeing up by entering into contact with those who use it.

7. ICONIC ACTS AND COLLECTIVE SUBJECTS

One of the "more powerful iconic acts" applies to collective subjects. According to Bredkamp's theory it belongs to the category of the "substitutive iconic acts ", that is the acts in which image and body coincide, up to the point of being interchangeable. We are dealing with objects which are charged with identity energies that develop behaviors: "the images not only hold together the community, but by means of their plastic character create political aims able to influence the actions of all" (Bredekamp 157). The substitution is understood as "symbolic cross road between image and action" in which the action is caused by the energy of the substitutive image and the same body can become, in its effective presence, image. An example is the Twin Towers attacks, in which the iconic work and the people are interchangeable. The same highly summary executions of the Isis testify that interchangeability: "they do not show corpses like images of death, but the people are killed in order to use them as images" (Bredekamp p. 184)

Evidently the political power of the substitutive image is immense: war is today, in the first instance, a battle of images

8. Objects and images

These concepts drawn up in the context of the history of images attest the validity and poignancy of the categories elaborated by Italian symbolic politics up to the present. What the iconic act puts at stake is properly the dimension of the imaginal which is enlighten in its irreducible duplicity. The energy of the image springs, in fact, from inside, in the game of give and take that is going on between those who see and the same image. The "iconic act" is given in this relationship. It is worth emphasizing that according to the school of symbolic politics, the imaginal reality is not only that of the images in a technical sense. Any object can become an imaginal reality. Its symbolic-imaginal properties are not exhausted at all, in fact, in pure physical ones, namely the determined matter of which the object consists, and not even in the shapes and texture it consists of. On the other hand, its symbolic value does not reside in the simple imagination and affective tension that invests the object; otherwise its material consistence could be transformed or even eliminated. The imaginary (with its emotionalities, feelings, etc) and the physical, visible and tangible matter are indissolubly melted in an irreplaceable and immodificabile object, and that unity as a matter of fact makes a symbol.

9. Conclusions

Some partial conclusions. In the contemporary political landscape, we can observe how the symbolic and the imaginal interpretation can help to understand politics, which is more and more defined through images. Moreover, the analysis of symbols and imaginal assumes a normative function: the hermeneutics of the imaginal reality can contribute to enlighten also the characteristic degenerations of the image of the so-called society of the simulacra. The competent analysis of the imaginal can explain the dissolution of the real and the substitution of a space of mirage of not factual truth, of images that are neither symbolic nor imaginal. Through a symbolic analysis it is possible to unmask the hyperreal nature of the simulacrum, which invades society and politics in the contemporary world. The symbolic hermeneutics of the Italian school characterizes more in depth than other methodologies the categories of politics because it deals with the unity, singularity and totality of the experi-

ence, without reducing it to singular aspects, drawn from economics, history, law, morality, sociology, anthropology, ethnicity, etc. This is possible thanks to the fact that power, procedures, legitimacy, forms of government, customs, beliefs, ideals, ideologies, social relations, commonly aggregated formations, values, and interests have a symbolic nature. They are not the result of reasonable comparison of intuitions, interests, hierarchies, and so on. Every political aggregation has at its basis the mobilitation of symbolic energies that constitute and animate it, just like in every collective behaviour. The total value of the emotional energies emanated by symbols in the contexts of politics can be understood if we think about a piece of artwork. We can understand artwork considering it as entire comprehensive whole that cannot be decomposed and analyzed in its singles unconnected parts. We can say that the symbol does not means but it just makes sensible, perceptible. If anything, "it means" can be understood in the intransitive sense of the verb." (Speculum symbolicum II, artetera, Capua, 2014, p. 8)

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